

## RESEARCH ON KARAIM/KARAITE RELIGIOUS MUSIC. NEW HORIZONS

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Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre,  
Chair of the Lithuanian Karaim Cultural Society  
Palangos 1–4, Vilnius, Lithuania  
e-mail: firkavik@gmail.com

In this paper a short summary is given of the history of research into Karaim/Karaite religious music up to this day, and possible new horizons for future investigations are outlined. It is argued that a related field of research, namely linguistics, with its recent input into Karaite grammatical thought can help open new possibilities for musicological research, too. Two main figures of Karaite intellectuals from the Near East in the early 11th century, ‘Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf ibn Nūh and ‘Abū al-Faraj Hārūn ibn Faraj, are introduced. Their treatises on the Bible and its Hebrew language, together with other works of their followers, as discovered in the Firkovich collections from St. Petersburg, represent the Karaite way of theoretical thought on these subjects, including the way of reading (chanting) the Bible with the help of Masoretic accents. So an investigation into mediaeval theories and their comparison to living traditions of liturgical chant of modern Karaim/Karaite communities can bring new understanding of the Karaite musical heritage and can also be instrumental in pursuing the evolution of Karaite religious identity throughout ages in different geographical areas.

*Key words:* Karaim/Karaite music, religious chant, psalmody, Masoretic accents, Karaite grammatical thought, Karaim language, ibn Nūh, al-Faraj Hārūn.

Communities of Karaim belief that live in today’s Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Russia make one ethnically kindred Turkic nation originating from nomadic Kipchak tribes. In scientific literature these communities are mostly referred to as Karaims, since this term is also their ethnonym and the name of their native language that belongs to the Western Kipchak branch of Turkic languages and is included in the UNESCO list of endangered languages.

Other communities confessing Karaism and living in modern Turkey, Israel, and the USA (or their predecessors from Middle Ages in Near East, in Iraq, Egypt, or Byzantium) being of various ethnic origins are usually denominated as ‘Karaites’, using the Anglicised version of an original Hebrew root *kara-* (meaning ‘to read [*the Scripture*]’).

However, this distinction in terminology (Karaites/Karaims) to mark different ethnic origins of people is not always rigorously applied in scientific discourse, which causes various kinds of confusion or sometimes even leads to scientific misinterpretations of facts. In order to avoid any possible uncertainties in our paper both terms will be used, as appropriate. Only in some cases, where a holistic approach is needed, the term 'Karaite' will be applied to encompass everything related to Karaism (e.g. Karaite studies). This explanation is needed since religious music is one of the fields within Karaite studies that distinguishes in its specificities between those ethnically different communities.

The research conducted on Karaite/Karaim music has got so far three geographically defined branches. The first one is dedicated to the legacy of the Crimean Karaims and mostly concentrating on their folk music (see Osmanova 1990; Alijev 2001). Religious music of this community, both liturgical and paraliturgical, has survived only in some historical records, which are kept in private archives and have not been published. However, the Crimean Karaim community is the only one that still uses some instrumental music and dances, while these genres are either extinct or never existed elsewhere.

The second branch of research covers Karaite communities of present Israel and the USA uniting mostly Karaite emigrants from Egypt (see Hirshberg 1986, 1989; Kollender 2003). These communities have kept some old liturgical and paraliturgical melodies, but the largest part of their repertoire consists of new compositions for religious purposes stemming from after 1950s. There are no examples of folk music in these communities.

The third branch is dedicated to the musical heritage of the Lithuanian (and Polish) Karaim community (mostly works by the author of the present article<sup>1</sup>) that preserved a vast amount of orally extant liturgical and paraliturgical melodies, and also a tiny repertoire of folk songs. The author of this paper has dedicated her work to the thorough analysis of Lithuanian Karaim music that is on the edge of extinction. One part of her work was a comparison of Lithuanian Karaim melodic legacy to the available examples of liturgical, paraliturgical and folk music in other Karaim and Karaite communities. Part of liturgical melodies, namely the singing of psalms was also compared to Jewish counterparts.

An important tool used by the author of this article for previously conducted research on Karaim liturgical chant was a synergetic approach towards the chants built on relations between religious (Biblical) texts and melodies of chants through Masoretic accentuation<sup>2</sup>. The melodies were presented as a system of melodic types formed according to the main disjunctive Masoretic accents as well as compared to available examples of other Karaim (Crimea) and Karaite (emigrants from Egypt)

<sup>1</sup> See the list of publications in [https://www.academia.edu/7602891/list\\_of\\_publications](https://www.academia.edu/7602891/list_of_publications).

<sup>2</sup> Masoretes were scholars of the 8th–10th centuries in the Middle East engaged in fixing the form of Hebrew texts of the Bible through additional signs and comments (Muraoka and Jouon 2011; Blau 1976; Wickes 1887–1888; deHoop 2008; Kahle 1927). Masoretic accents (disjunctive and conjunctive) represent a sort of ecphonetic notation, and have the closest relationship to 'musical' expression (in Western understanding) of religious texts.

communities. The ways in which those Masoretic accents are respected while chanting psalmody for different occasions was also the main issue for comparison with Jewish melodic counterparts.

There were twofold outcomes presented, firstly, that melodically seen this extant Karaim repertoire is an original and comprehensive one, according to tonal axes divisible into *four* groups and with clear melodic cadencies for disjunctive Masoretic accents, and secondly, that the strict Karaite liturgical rule did not allow for any freedom in the interpretation of Masoretic accents in psalmody, every chanting of psalms whatever occasion or place for their performance be had to respect and follow the accentuation, while Rabbanite communities easily disregarded the meaning of accents in order to emphasise the melody itself, especially when performing psalms outside the liturgy (Randhofer 1995).

There was no further Masora-related research undertaken either on Lithuanian Karaim music tradition, or on musical legacies of other Karaim/Karaite communities. However, Masoretic legacy as such and Karaite grammatical thought from Early Middle Ages in the meantime were continuously an object of various linguistic investigations, which gives a substantial hint for opening further horizons in research on Karaim/Karaite religious music. Some thoughts are presented in the following pages.

In Karaite liturgy, because of the orthodox textual attitudes stemming from the core idea of Karaism to stick to the original text of the Old Testament, likewise in mainstream Islam (Nelson 1985) with relation to the text of Koran, sound was never perceived as music, even if the whole liturgy has to be chanted. The most important issue in the ceremony was, and still is, the meaning of the words of prayers and the notion of its correct expression and presentation.

The biblical text itself, its language with all components became an important object both for Karaite scholars and religious followers. During the Early Middle Ages Karaite grammarians sought to express Karaite theological identity by developing alternatives to the rabbinic linguistic systems of describing Hebrew (Khan 2013). Elements indicative of Karaite theology are also palpable in the commentaries of the Masoretes. Notably, some scholars claim that at least a part or, perhaps, even the entire Masorete community of Tiberias city (Tiberian Masoretes) was, in fact, Karaite (Kahle 1927; Zer 2003). Whatever the truth, the tradition of Tiberian Masoretes has been followed in all printed editions of the Hebrew Bible.

The scholars investigated many new manuscript sources relating to the Karaites of the mediaeval Near East from the Firkovich collections of manuscripts that are in the possession of the Public Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. These collections were acquired in the 19th century by the famous Karaim bibliophile Abraham Firkovich (1787–1874). As a result of their scientific work, a group of scholars under the leadership of Prof. Geoffrey Khan from Cambridge University published a series of critical editions of several manuscripts as well as several other books revealing a great deal of new knowledge on Karaite intellectual activities especially in early Middle Ages.

In Khan's words, these manuscript sources "demonstrate clearly that the mediaeval Karaites were not an isolated group, but a powerful intellectual force that played

a central role in the development of many aspects of Jewish thought. (...) In the Middle Ages centres of Karaism were founded initially in Iran and Iraq, to which much of its early intellectual development can be traced. It was in Jerusalem, however, during the 10th and 11th centuries that Karaite scholarship reached its highest point of creativity and a large proportion of Karaite formative texts were written” (Khan 2000, p. 1).

Firkovitch’s collections include manuscripts from various fields, such as biblical exegesis, biblical translation, Hebrew grammar, Hebrew lexicography, philosophy and law. But they shed particular light on Karaite grammatical thought. “These collections give access to long, often complete, manuscripts of a variety of Karaite grammatical works, and it is possible to investigate in detail this scholarship, which played a central role in medieval Karaite thought” (Khan 2000, p. 4).

As further stated by Khan, the two key figures in the history of Karaite grammatical thought, whose works have come down to us from the Middle Ages, are ‘Abū Ya’qūb Yūsuf ibn Nūh (2nd half of 10th century AD – beginning of 11th century AD, a representative of so-called early Karaite tradition of Hebrew grammatical thought) and his student ‘Abū al-Faraj Harūn ibn Faraj (first half of the 11th century AD). The latter continued some of the elements of the early tradition, but was innovative in many ways, both in method and content (Khan 2000, p. 5).

Abū al-Faraj Harūn lived and worked in Jerusalem, where he was attached to a Karaite college that consisted of a circle of Karaite scholars who devoted themselves to various fields of learning, in addition to that of grammar. After the death of ibn Nūh, Abū al-Faraj took over the leadership of the college (Khan – Gallego – Olszowy-Schlanger 2003, p. xi).

Abū al-Faraj Harūn has authored at least eight works, grammatical compositions, exegetical works, all centered on the study of the Bible (Goldstein 2011, p. 15). One of them is a unique in its kind treatise of that time on pronunciation and cantillation<sup>3</sup> of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition of biblical Hebrew under the title *Hidāyat al-Qāri* (‘Guide for the reader’, written in Arabic). This treatise, probably the most important composition in orthoepic<sup>4</sup> literature (Eldar 1992, p. 40), consists of three parts – the first one is on consonants and their pronunciation, the second one is on vowels and their pronunciation, and the third one is on accents (Levy 1936, p. 32).

As underlined by Khan, *Hidāyat al-Qāri* “appears to be more widely known than his grammatical works outside of Palestine. Adaptations of the original longer version were made in Yemen, apparently in the 13th century, one in Hebrew and the other in Arabic. Two Hebrew translations of the shorter version were made in Central Europe in the Middle Ages. One of these was produced in Mainz, Germany, and was entitled *Seper Horayt ha-Qore*” (‘The Book of Instruction for the Reader’). The other exists in various manuscripts of Italian provenance, which present it with the title *Token ‘Ezra or Seper Ta’ame ha-Miqra* (‘The Book of Biblical Accents’). In the manu-

<sup>3</sup> Cantillation is a chanting of readings from the Bible. This term might be used for general denomination of chanting or might specifically relate to reading the Hebrew Bible following Masoretic accents in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Orthoepy – the art of correct reading of the Bible (Eldar 1992, p. 34).

script in which it is entitled *Seper Ta'ame ha-Miqra*, the work is erroneously attributed to Judah ibn Bal'am. Parts of the shorter version of *Hidāyat al-Qāri* were paraphrased in Hebrew by Byzantine Karaite Joseph ha-Qustandini in his eclectic work *'Adat de-borim* ('Swarm of Bees'), which was composed some time in the 11th century (Khan – Gallego – Olszowy-Schlanger 2003, p. xxxii).

There are some relatively recent investigations undertaken specifically on *Hidāyat al-Qāri*, in particular by scholars Busi (1984) and Eldar (1994). There were also tries to adapt the knowledge of Harun to Jewish chanting traditions (Hitin-Mashiah – Sharvit 2013). But it seems that it would be of particular importance to see what is the relationship between Harun's treatise as a representation of Karaite theory from the Middle Ages and the present Karaim tradition of religious chant, especially since this tradition is still living and following ancient rules and concepts.

To discover this kind of relationship becomes even more intriguing because of an existing assertion that after about the 12th century, when the academic movement of Karaite grammatical thought declined, Karaites lost their specific features in religious exegesis, liturgy, treatment of Hebrew (Lasker 2001). Some scientifically proven facts from other fields argue to the contrary of the latter assertion. For example, Karaims of Lithuania, Poland, Crimea and Karaites from Istanbul have preserved characteristic features of the ancient Tiberian pronunciation of Masoretic Hebrew that are absent in other traditions (Harviainen 1991, 1992). Furthermore, in the religious poems of the 17th–19th-century AD Karaite/Karaim authors were expressing their specifically Karaite piety and philosophical notions, such as calculation of Karaite festivals calendar or statements of condemnation of rabbinic customs (Tuori 2013). Liturgical music might be a new additional argument in support of distinctiveness of Karaim or Karaite legacy.

Another still unlocked feature of Karaim musical heritage might be related to the Karaim language used in the liturgy. In the course of time both languages, the native active Karaim and the 'holy' language of the Scriptures, Hebrew, mostly passive, were present in the liturgy with different intensity. So a comparative linguistics study of Hebrew translational equivalents in Karaim<sup>5</sup> could shed a bit more light on the variation in the realisation of Masoretic accents between the two languages, thereby, defining the role of translation in further determining the specifics of Karaim chanting.

By illuminating the evolutionary path of Karaite tradition from a mediaeval written precept on liturgical chant to a living spoken word and chanted tune, the forthcoming comparative investigation will bring about a conceptual novelty into Karaite studies in several respects. *First*, it will potentially point to liturgical music as bearer of ancient codes and as shedding light to the history of Karaite liturgical identity. *Secondly*, it will provide rationale for advancing the scientific inquiry into the ethnic, religious and cultural dynamics and transformations in Europe. There is evidence of Karaite scholars travelling from the Near East to Byzantium in the 11th–13th centuries AD (Ankori 1959; Polliack 2003), but any further trace of their scholarly mission

<sup>5</sup> For the specific issue on relations between Karaim language and Hebrew see Csató (2011), Olach (2013), Jankowski (1997), Németh (2011).

has been lost. The manifestations of Karaite theoretical concepts in modern times might open new avenues for research on the modes of religious and cultural interactions between Karaites, Jews and Christians in Europe. *Thirdly*, the new findings will disseminate the scientific knowledge to Karaite/Karaim communities, thereby empowering ethnic, religious and cultural self-consciousness and aspirations, the prerequisites of their survival and continuing contribution to the world's cultural heritage<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to her friend Jonas for encouraging discussions related to the topic of this paper and helping generously in preparing some texts.

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